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Melancholic Memory and Mourning Images: Death's Resistance to Representation in Abbas Kiarostami's Films

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze the *dispositif* for the emergence of mourning images in Abbas Kiarostami's movies and the subsequent melancholic perception of the viewer that is created by the rendition of these images, while also highlighting the importance of the artistic medium of cinema in this rendition. The major strategy for the translation of mourning into images is the effacement of the subject, an emblematic technique for Kiarostami's film-making. The positioning of the viewer as a participant with restrictive access to the world inside the film creates the sensation of longing for a lost visual integrity. The melancholy of the viewer thus identifies the absence and pluralizes it. The mechanisms that will be used in the analysis refer to the genesis of the gaze, the ethical eye of the camera, and the construction of the Other in the process of mourning.

Keywords: mourning image, melancholia, Abbas Kiarostami, perception, the Other, gaze, respect.

On mourning and melancholia

The potentiality of distinguishing mourning and melancholia, or the absence of such a distinction should be analyzed commencing with the theory that was brought forth by Sigmund Freud through his work from 1917 *Trauer und melancholie*. The separation of these two concepts pertains to the etiology of the subject's reactions that is set upfront with a loss. Freud operates in a clinical manner with his conceptual device, highlighting the pathological nature of melancholy and offering supplementary legitimacy to mourning. Accor-

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ding to Freud mourning directly correlated to the death of a person or the lost of an object or an ideal. For melancholia, the loss of the object is withdrawn from the consciousness, the subject being able to understand or perceive the loss, but not the lost object in itself. Thus, in mourning, as one of the most memorable passages states, "it is the world which has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego itself" (3044). Freud, in the attempt to clarify the distinction between the two concepts, prosecutes melancholy of a narcissistic identification with the object-cathexis.

This methodological distinction serves as a starting point for the subsequent circumscriptions of the terms. The analysis is mainly focused on the configuration of mourning and melancholia on a filmic level, not on the psychoanalytical investigation of the characters. Furthermore, the two movies that this paper will be centered on (*A Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*) cannot be entirely subjected to the primal delimitation between mourning and melancholia, since in both of these movies, death is presented as an anticipated event. The postponing of this event and the consequent awaiting to which both the viewer and the characters are subjected represent the main axes for the work of mourning.

Slavoj Žižek, quoting Agamben's oeuvre, explains that melancholy is the mourning for something that the subject has never possessed, thus it mourns the absence of a presence. (661) But the certification of the possession is another criteria that is subjected to doubt. Taking a look at *Stanzas* by Giorgio Agamben, where the author describes the strategy of the melancholic subject of treating an object still present as being absent.

"Covering its object with the funeral trappings of mourning, melancholy confers upon it the phantasmagorical reality of what is lost; but insofar as such mourning is for an unobtainable object, the strategy of melancholy opens a space for the existence of the unreal and marks out a scene in which the ego may enter into a relation with it and attempt an appropriation such as no other possession could rival and no loss possibly threatens." (20)

Following the interaction and the double-sided game between mourning and melancholia, it is important to remark the ethical interrogation that these two attitudes bring towards either a presence or towards a potential presence. When faced with death, the concrete human subject pays respect to the precarity of life and to singularity, a singularity that marks the impossibility of reproducing or redoubling the lost subject. What is lost, or seemed lost, becomes a point of origin. The subject of the loss has to call out, search, name the lost object and naming, as Jacques Derrida said, even though it should be the maximal expression of a singularity, it actually forces the subject into a methonymical sequence. (*The Work* 38-42) The call, given the impossibility of being reciprocated, replaces the subject of the loss since the name that was once affixed to someone ceases to have an indexical value and becomes an icon. Subsequently, the initial call for a presence that was viewed as irreplaceable, becomes the process of

pluralization for that presence. What could be described as a call in death, or in absence, that cannot be returned, obliges the caller to paradoxically reproduce or pluralize the origin that is retained as impossible to appropriate considering its absence, and that, since it cannot respond, remains suspended in a past untouchable reality, through which the void between the subject and the object is even further deepened. This could provide an insight for the genesis of mourning and melancholia. Hence mourning becomes the breaking point between the singular and the plural, coinciding with a sign that acts *in absentia*, while melancholy becomes the process of pluralizing the object of the loss. Melancholia, in its trial of stabilizing the image of what was lost in a manner as similar to the original as possible, infinitely tries to recreate the world as a whole, instead of accepting the absence. The grieving process marks the line between the world that has ended, and the world that has to go on.

Cinema and the specters of melancholia

In his book *Le livre à venir*, in the essay on Proust's writing of time, Blanchot asserts that:

"the essence of the image is to be altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and mysterious than, the thought of the innermost being; without signification, yet summoning up the depth of any possible meaning; unrevealed yet manifest, having that absence-as-presence which constitutes the lure and the fascination of the Sirens" (14).

The idea of the "presence-as-absence" of images finds its roots in the mythical times, considering the story of Pliny about the Corinthian girl that traced the outline of her lover on a wall before his departure for war. (Derrida, *Memoirs* 45) It is the "here and the now" that is transported and kept for an "elsewhere" that ultimately signs an act of mourning for something that will be lost at the melancholic junction of times. Or "the here and now" is what is questioned in regard to the "elsewhere" of the photography. And exactly in this aspect Barthes appraises the value of the photograph, while also deriding the incapacity of cinematography of doing so, due to the nature of the montage (78). Oppositely, Jean-Luc Nancy states that films introduce an experience of looking that photography lacks, and that films do not reproduce reality, but show the movement of the real, thus the kinetic art needing an eye that is guided and that guides the interpretation. (10) The viewers find themselves in the search of something external while using internal or internalized means. The portrayal of movement in movies can be seen as a succession, rather than an object for aesthetic perception, since movement cannot be depicted in itself. However, the solid argument for analysis lays in the relationship established by these successions and the lingering that one image enforces towards a following one, and on the juxtaposition and the rethinking of one image into the other. These aforementioned positions should not be understood as a discussion on the mimetism of visual representations in different art mediums, but

as a trial of showing the individual burden that each visual art carries in its process of rendering an absence visible. It also should not be deducted that all images are mourning-images, but that images bear the specter of a presence that is no longer there (except for non-figurative art). The *dispositif* that can create mourning-images will be the subject of analysis in the following chapter.

The last film of Abbas Kiarostami, *24 frames* that has appeared postmortem in 2017, presents an enchanting rendition of the dialogue between time photography and cinema. It is composed of 24 shots of about four-and-a-half minutes each and presents a digital montage of photographs, videos, animations and sounds. Kiarostami artistic purpose in this film was to render the "before and after" of a frame that could capture solely one moment. (Ahmad Kiarostami, *24 frames*) But the memory of an image is more an act of imagination, rather than one of remembrance. For example, the fifteenth frame illustrates an older family looking at the Eiffel Tower that according to the director were mesmerized by the view. Over this simple framing the film adds images of passers-by dressed in modern clothes and a modern baby stroller that place the footage in the synchronic time of the memory. Subsequently, an animation of falling snow and amplified city sounds are included in the "frame", all of these creating a visual projection of an internal memory. Paul Ricoeur, discussing the difference between reflexivity and worldliness in his book *Memory, History, Forgetting*, asserts that "One does not simply remember oneself, seeing, experiencing, learning; rather one recalls the situation in the world in which one has seen, experienced, learned. These situations in the world and worlds in which something has occurred." (36) But what this movie accomplishes is the recreation of seeing in its most subjective form and the recreation of this act of seeing in an external image.

The mourning images of Abbas Kiarostami

Jean-Luc Nancy affirms in the beginning of his book *The Evidence of Film* that "Kiarostami is not just another new author" (12) and that "with him what is changing is a world, the culture of a world, what we used to call a 'civilization'" (12). Regardless of the critical stance that is enforced upon, either the approving or the dismissive, the director's imagistic culture is vividly recognized as being unique to him. What his cinema achieves is a pervasive pensiveness on sight that is closer to sense than to perception.

The study on evidence that Nancy undertakes is crucial to the aforementioned imagistic sensitivity. He further states that:

"Evidence always comprises a blind spot within its very obviousness: in this way it leans on the eye. The 'blind spot' does not deprive the eye of its sight: on the contrary, it makes an opening for a gaze and it *presses* upon it to look. I have sought to jot down, without unifying them, the moments, the fragments of this pressure, which Kiarostami's films exert —for that is their function— and which presses or expresses through him something of

the essence of cinema and our existence with it, today, for we are no longer without it, without film, and he is saying that also." (12)

The possibility of vision is laid down by the impossibility of the eye to encompass everything. The blind spot and the parts left invisible help the creation of intelligibility inside a frame. The question of Kiarostami's cinematic image lays not in the trial of finding a whole image, but in the emergence of these images. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty once said, "[t]rue philosophy is to learn to see the world again" (*Phenomenology of Perception* XX). The visible is formed not as a sole perception, but as a "topography" (Alphonso Lingis XLIII), whose questions do not arise from hermeneutic interlacements, but from a need for exploration, as the visible is both synchronic and diachronic and resides *the here and the now* while at the same time sending to an elsewhere. And in the same way that being is a "negation of negation" (*The Visible* 66) and nothingness has "an infrastructure of being" (*idem*), the visible is a denial of the invisible, and the invisible is subjugated to the structure of the visible. The new culture that arises in Kiarostami's films, and in the films of other directors that should not become the object of this analysis, is one that focuses not on the image as a form of the visible, but as a form of visibility. As Kiarostami said during an interview with Andrew Pulvers, "[i]’ve often noticed that we are not able to look at what we have in front of us, unless it’s inside a frame." (*Kiarostami’s best shot*) Henceforth, the evidence of film is principally an act of framing that becomes a proof of a definite visibility, while simultaneously hiding certain places from the vision, that become subjected to the orderly disposition of the film. This effacing process and the replacement that is undergone in the montage of the movies is crucial to the construction of the mourning images.

Death seems to be a recurring motif in Kiarostami's movies, such as *Life and Nothing More*, *Taste of Cherry*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, and, indirectly, *Five dedicated to Ozu*, but it is not the presence of the subject in itself the one that renders this oeuvre distinct, but the way in which it is never staged, but only suggested. It is both a way of displaying an ethical distance towards the subject, and of translating its value as a "blind spot" for the *life that goes on*. The images are not showing the death in itself, but the mourning process of the word that seems to have reached a standstill; a standstill that is paradoxically depicted in the aimless moving of different objects. A second paradox is constituted by the realization that the ongoing mourning is one that expects death, not one that has met it, the epitome of this position being placed on the character from *Taste of Cherry*, Mr. Badii, that bears the task of grieving his own death.

Taste of Cherry

Taste of Cherry starts with the almost ritually scene in Kiarostami's cinema that is filmed from the inside of a moving car, procedure that has been named by Nancy *boîte-à-regard*, a seeing box, that has two interpretative valencies: firstly, it provides the necessary frame for the emergence of *seeing*, and secondly, it reinforces the realm of movement inside the cinematic art. Deleuze assert in the beginning of his famous

theorization of the movement-image that:

"one misses the movement because one constructs a Whole, one assumes that 'all is given', whilst movement only occurs if the whole is neither given nor givable. As soon as a whole is given to one in the eternal order of forms or poses, or in the set of any-instant-whatevers, then either time is no more than the image of eternity, or it is the consequence of the set; there is no longer room for real movement." (7)

Thus, the frame, or the moving frame, constitutes a particular image in the culture of cinematography, where the spectator is forced into the consciousness of seeing, that is likewise a coercion towards realizing what is left outside the frame. Frequently, the camera cuts out central parts of an otherwise coherent visual narrative (the event that could have been a form of climax, the face of a person, a whole character) leaving the story with the interdiction of *pathos* and the viewer with the interdiction of *catharsis*.

Taste of cherry follows Mr. Badii's journey of finding someone to bury him after he commits suicide; a journey that remains unconcluded, since the last scene, instead of showing the proof of the character's suicide, contains a footage of the filming crew around the cherry tree. In his pursuit for a helper, Mr. Badii meets a Kurdish soldier, an Afghan seminarist and a taxidermist. The first two refuse him for ethical and religious reasons, while the last one provides both the promise of help, due to his financial needs that stem from his son's sickness, and the story of his own suicide attempt that was forestalled by the taste of mulberries. The emphasis in the proposal always lays on the ritualic value of his death. The motives are never disclosed, and according to an interview that Kiarostami gave regarding *A Taste of Cherry*, he refused to tell Mr. Badii's story "in order to avoid any emotional links with the audience. My character is like one of those little figures that architects put in their drawings, to show the scale of the buildings. They are just figures, not people you could have any feelings about". (qtd. in Elena, 124) The character is the pretext for the discussion regarding voluntary death.

Mr. Badii is depicted mourning his own anticipated death. The viewer can only speculate on the world that has become empty, since the movie never invites anyone in, neither other characters, nor the viewers. There is a scene during the conversation with the guard that becomes symbolic for this parallel dwelling of the world. Mr. Badii stays outside on the terrace and looks at the falling soil, while being separated by a glass-window from his interlocutor. The junction space between the two existences is transparent, but one of them is encapsulated in the *funeral trappings* of loss. "[T]omorrow's death, in the future perfect tense", the one that in Ricoeur's view asks a question about survival in the subject that is anticipating its death (*Living* 34), is the one that separates an entropic interiority from the other.

If "life is like a train that keeps moving forward" (*Taste of Cherry*), the main character is far from the forwardness of life. His search seems to be focused on returns,

roundabouts and the lack of direction, while the camera focuses on long shots centered on objects that tend to move steadily forward, such as a planes and birds. The technique of contrasting movements is recurring for the movie. In the final part of the movie, after finishing the discussion with the taxidermist, Mr. Badii spends the longest time in an unframed scene. He leaves the looking-box that has permitted him to scrutinize the exterior in search for the witness of his death and directs his gaze towards an airplane that navigated the sky, then towards a group of students running on a sports-ground, until finally setting in the first static landscape of the movie, one that cannot be explored topographically, the image of the setting sun over the river. The only moving objects of the scene are the cranes and a cat, but the delicacy of their movement and their hazardousness translate the shot in an almost floating photograph. According to Benjamin, "mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask. [...] Accordingly, the theory of mourning can only be developed in the description of the world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholic man" (qtd. in Ferber 139) The act of mourning for his life now happens in a scenery that almost has the value of a *topos* for depictions of melancholy. The character becomes a spectator of the world, he is contemplating its movement after being the its creator. Since he has finally finished his search for an aide and a witness, he was freed from the trappings of the uncertainty of his death and starts to gaze upon the world that will survive his loss. According to the promised ritual, the taxidermist will call for Mr. Badii and if the call remains without and answer, the hole will be covered and the desertic land will regain its integrity. The work of mourning will also be transferred from Mr. Badii to the taxidermist.

Subsequently, the camera shows Mr. Badii in his home from the outside. The viewer's position is always liminally voyeuristic, since there is always a sense prohibition from entering a certain space, that limits the ability of the spectator to see. A sense of respect for what is rendered in images seems to pervade the inner workings of the movie, but:

"[t]he film's maker makes nothing other than a making real and the realization of a real: of the real that a respectful gaze makes possible. But it would be wrong to discern anything stiff obsequious in the idea of respect. There is no authority overlooking the filmmaker's; he too subjects himself to the demands of a look." (Nancy 38)

The deference shown in the creation of the images is crucial for the mourning scheme, considering the needed distance for not perturbing the unique with the general (Derrida, *The Work* 45). From the point of view of the story line, unlike in the case of an "accomplished" work of mourning in which the death and the absence are actually present, Mr. Badii has the means to respond to his own pluralization, but not to its possibility. While the film could have clearly illustrated a narrative regarding his death, Kiarostami decides to do the exact opposite. He renders the reality of the will of

dying without the pathetic formula of the narrativization, since the viewers, as stated by his son Ahman Kiarostami in an interview, have the responsibility of creating the meaning inside their minds (24 frames). At the same time, the lack of response and argument on behalf of Mr. Badii is paradoxically an act of maintaining his integrity as a subject through the transposition of the "unqualifiable in life into death" (Derrida, *The Work* 47).

The Wind Will Carry Us

Many of the constitutive aspects analyzed until this point can also be followed within Kiarostami's movie from 1999, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, such as the waiting for the event of death, the effacement of the subject, the car framing and focus on movement. The differences can be traced within the topics regarding the configuration of the mourning, and the burden of the waiting. The main character is a journalist or cultural anthropologist, posing as an engineer, while the central character and the pretext of the movie is represented by an old sick woman from a Kurdish community whose death and mourning should be documented by the engineer and his team. But the event does not occur and its deferment and waiting forces him to try to understand community, rather than explore it. In the end, the respectful gaze of the camera towards death is recovered through the renunciation of the engineer. He interacts with a limited number of characters and the connections are almost always obstacolated: the child abandons him after his mistreatment, after an otherwise hindered connection in which the child viewed the engineer as a threat to both his studies and his family's privacy; the delver is never shown until the scene of the accident; the milkmaid keeps her face out of his view and subsequently out of the camera's view; his colleagues stop being shown after the scene of the arrival and the communication with them only takes place through doors and his phone calls are always interrupted and predominantly one-sided. The cause for this collective refusal lays in the intrusiveness of his intentions, that ultimately hide the impossibility of understanding the otherness.

Derrida affirms that mourning is not conditioned by an actual death since it is a precondition for the acceptance of an otherness. (*The Politics* 17). Furthermore, Judith Butler's theories come in accordance and as an extension to Derrida's stance, mourning is conditioned by the acceptance of the dead person's life as a life. "An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all." (21) It cannot be said that the engineer from *The Wind Will Carry Us* does not qualify her as a grievable life, but the claim of exoticism and the scientific eye that he imposes devoid the work of mourning from its humanizing element. A scene that completes this hypothesis and shows the extension of the impossibility of mourning is the moment in which he is announced of a family member's death, announcement that is neglected by him, due to the fact that he was waiting for a phone call from his coordinator.

In the end, the event that re-establishes the character's view is the confrontation with the possibility of death in the scene that shows the delver's accident. The embodiment of the precarity of life becomes the mechanism for regaining the respect towards death and images of mourning. He then proceeds to bring the doctor to pay a visit to the old lady and to leave the community. With this moment, the prohibition for the capturing of images is lifted and he manages to photograph the women that were leaving the sick person's house. A similar moment of renunciation is marked by the throwing of the bone that acted as a correlative object for his anthropological impetus. The investigative gaze has the purpose of saying something about the object, while the respectful gaze tries to let it speak for itself. In mourning, the later is needed, since the Other's words are heard by maintaining the image of the Other inside the mourner's mind. (Derrida, *The Work* 34-36) Thus, in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the mourning image is made possible through the regaining of the ethical prospect.

Conclusions

The respectful gaze represents a decisive device in the construction of Abbas Kiarostami's movies. In the transmission of melancholic imagery, this gaze should be oriented towards the either inner space of memory or towards the deciding eye of the viewer, while the mourning images are focused on the reception of the other through the announced death of the subject.

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